

HUMANISM—CONTEMPORARY STYLE—IN ETHICS AND ART

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

HUMANISM, historically speaking, is an intelligible and highly significant movement. The humanists of the renaissance had a real mission; they represented genuine progress, intellectual and moral. To them the world owed the revival and application of classical culture and classical ideals. The term humanism was charged with meaning.

But what is the humanism of today? What does it represent—progress or reaction? Is it enlightened or obscurantist? Does it respond to a realized need?

In this paper I shall ignore the religious phase of humanism, limiting myself in passing to one observation—namely, that in religious speculation humanism is certainly an advance on fundamentalism or even on diluted Theism. The Agnostic has little use for religious humanism, since it furnishes no solution of the religious problem as he conceives and formulates it. But, alas, the world is not wholly and fully Agnostic, and any movement which emphasizes the ethical and esthetic aspects of religion, and whittles down supernaturalism and mysticism, is so far forth on the side of the angels—if you will excuse the paradox. It may prove, in many cases, a stepping-stone to Agnosticism.

With literary and cultural humanism, I confess, I have no patience whatever. I regard it as an intellectual and literary monstrel. It reflects confusion of thought, inability, or unwillingness, to think clearly and logically. Croce contends that every error is a sin, a violation of the moral code, and he makes a rather strong case. I am not prepared to charge the literary humanists with willful insincerity, but I am satisfied that they take no pains to test their arguments scientifically and that they prefer mist and darkness to clarity and lucidity.

In the first place, let us define our terms with some approach to precision. What is humanism revolting against, what is it seeking to supersede, destroy, or revolutionize, and what school or schools are we to distinguish it from?

Ethically and socially, humanism is the supreme example of

supererogation. Carrying coal to Newcastle is performance of vital and pressing service beside it. For over a century social, economic, and political movements have been inspired by humanist sentiments. Chartism, Socialism, in its many varieties, communism, the single-tax, coöperation, etc., have humanism for their inspiration, and justice and fraternity as their objectives. They may all be unsound and impracticable, but their mistakes are of the head, as we say. None of them is open to the charge of indifference to humanity or human welfare. Moreover, even moderate liberals and sensible conservatives have favored and enacted considerable social welfare legislation—old age pensions laws, for example, health insurance, unemployment insurance, accident compensation laws, etc. Humanism, in short, is in full control of the field and, moreover, what has been done is merely a pledge of more radical measures in the near future of the same general type and character.

Thus the new humanists are appearing absurdly late and find themselves without mission or occupation. They have had nothing tangible to offer, and no active school or group has taken the slightest interest in their vain and irrelevant phrase-mongering.

But, some may object, the new humanists affirm and defend certain great principles, certain fundamental values. Indeed, they claim to possess a monopoly of the Great Affirmation. They find purpose in life, nobility and dignity and majesty in human personality. They scorn petty, mean material interests, and implore us to contemplate the sublime, the beautiful, the true, and the good in their last degrees of perfection. Is not this a splendid service to our prosaic age?

No; there is no service in platitudes ecstatically sung or spoken. The Great Affirmation is barren and empty. You cannot find purpose in life and then fail to communicate your revelation in intelligible formulae. What purpose *have* they found? Echo answers, what? It is impossible for the human mind to conceive the purpose of life. Attempts to define it have led to childish notions. There *may* be purpose in life, but we shall never know it. And that which we can never know can never be helpful to us for any human purpose whatever. It cannot guide conduct; it cannot give us ideals, it cannot give us comfort or strength in time of stress and peril.

As to human personality, we cannot improve on Shakespeare's characterization of man; he is neither angel nor demon. He has his unique qualities, and can ascend to great heights of virtue, stoi-

cism, and devotion. But he can also descend to the lowest depths of degradation and corruption. We must take him as he is, and certainly in the mass he is far from being admirable. Individuals rise to sainthood or to merited fame, but the average is decidedly mediocre. Millions of human beings are stupid, inefficient, superstitious, full of malice and hate. The worst enemy of man is man, and I know of nothing sillier than the tendency to worship man in the abstract. Let us, by all means, develop our finer potentialities. Let us give all human beings a fair chance, for doubtless much talent and much innate moral endowment are wasted under our conditions of life and education. But genius, intellectual or moral, will always be rare, and the great majority of men and women will always be what they are today—creatures of low standards and narrow horizons.

Humanist lyrics are a sorry substitute for clear ideas of justice, equality of opportunity, forbearance and charity. Let us endeavor to be decent to one another, and postpone our hymns to human nobility and human majesty till we succeed in abolishing war and cruelty and barbarism. I apprehend that our task will absorb our energies and resources for many centuries.

It is a strange and depressing thing that the new humanists have precious little to say on the subject of war, capital punishment, prison life, economic exploitation, involuntary idleness, and other abominations discreditable to our civilization. They are ignorant of economics, of political science, of sociology, you may say, and therefore cannot discuss these specific problems intelligently. Granted, but they do not seem to *feel* the evils and abuses of society, and are without any passion for righteousness. There is no genuine emotion in their rhetoric.

Ah, yes, they distinguish between humanitarianism and humanism, and I must not forget that distinction. Humanitarianism, they point out, may be sloppy, sentimental, shallow, indiscriminating. Of course it may, but, again, it may not. It would seem to be the business of humanism to develop a sound, wise, ripe, and lofty humanitarianism, but this they have no intention of doing. It is infinitely easier to dwell in the realm of cold abstractions.

Let me now turn to the principles stressed by the new humanists. These principles are—measure, proportion, balance, self-control, moderation, decorum, sincerity. Opposed to them are fana-

ticism, intolerance, dogmatism, hysteria, lust, pride, arrogance, vanity, insolence.

What philosopher, or even what man endowed with common sense, has ever contended that virtues are vices and vices virtues? The new humanists had better re-read the ancient and medieval classics. They will find there all the wisdom they claim as their particular contribution to culture. However, to revive certain truths is at times to render as important a service as to discover them. If our age has sinned grievously against the maxims of the philosophers, and has cultivated pride of arrogance, or fanaticism and dogmatism, then a recurrence to first principles is indeed necessary and good for all of us. But there is no evidence that our age is particularly and peculiarly guilty of fanaticism and arrogance. The claims of science, or in behalf of it, have been rather extravagant, but no true man of science, no true philosopher, has associated himself with the dogmatism of pseudo-science. Pasteur, Poincaré, Bergson, Michelson, Einstein, Tyndall, Huxley, Darwin, Spencer, Faraday, Clark-Maxwell, Croce, Planck, Jeans, Whitehead, Eddington and many other eminent men of science have cultivated and inculcated humility and open-mindedness, philosophic doubt and disinterested love of truth for its own sake.

Moreover, the new humanists are not conspicuous for consistency. They do not practice what they preach. In their polemics and their offensive-defensive controversies they have displayed the very vices they condemn—arrogance, intolerance, anger, and hate. They have not tried to understand their living opponents, or the great dead thinkers and world leaders whom they single out for the most intemperate and venomous attacks—Rousseau, for example. The new humanists are terribly human in the old sense of the term, and there is nothing new either in their ideas or in their behavior.

Perhaps the best formulation of their creed is that offered by Prof. Irving Babbitt, the leader of American neo-humanism. In general, he says, the debate between the humanist and the naturalist converges upon the problem of the will, and he continues:

The humanitarian assumes that the altruistic elements in man may, in some fashion or other, triumph over his egoistic impulses without the inner transformation that both religion and humanism require; that is, without the intervention of any principle that moves in an opposite direction from his unmodified temperamental self. In the language of religion, the humanitarian hopes to achieve salvation with-

out conversion. In still other terms, he hopes to find mechanical or emotional substitutes for self-control. The humanist, on the other hand, asserts that man cannot afford to remain merely temperamental, that he needs, with a primary view to his own happiness, to discipline his outgoing desires to the law of measure. This humanistic discipline can be secured only by the exercise of a special quality of will according to sound standards; and in an untraditional age like the present these standards themselves, I have sought to show elsewhere, can be secured only by a right coöperation of reason and imagination.

Again, Prof. Babbitt, in the same article, says: "One may experience life on three levels—the naturalistic, the humanistic and the religious. Life in the humanistic sense means to live moderately, sensibly, and to the best advantage in the society of other men."

Truly, the mountain has labored and the proverbial little mouse brought forth. What sane man has ever questioned the wisdom of living moderately, sensibly, and in the society of other men? What of the old gospel of plain living and high thinking? What of Matthew Arnold's sweet reasonableness and high seriousness? And what of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers? Who has ever denied the need of self-discipline, of decent and worthy standards? Prof. Babbitt is sorely afraid of human lust, of egotism, of sadism, of tyranny, of greed and malice, but the new humanism has no sovereign specifics against these vices, and is not the first among schools to warn against them, or to suggest wise compromises between passion and reason. Sound standards embody and represent such compromises, but, of course, we cannot be dogmatic in respect of standards.

What is right and sound for one age is wrong and unsound for another. Even the ten commandments are sadly in need of revision and are, in fact, being revised. Some of the humanists are on the way to Rome, and others to Nowhere.

The literary and esthetic views of the new humanists are logical corollaries and deductions from their ethical and social doctrines. They hate and despise the naturalists, the realists, the romanticists, the symbolists and the impressionists. In art, as in life, they seek and admire balance, measure, moderation, sobriety and other classical virtues. To them, Rousseau is the source and fountain of all literary abominations and felonies. Poor Jean Jacques! He certainly was not a disciplined, scientific thinker or scholarly

and profound philosopher. He was guilty of many sins, moreover, in his personal relations, and the narrow-minded moralist makes no allowances for genius and is usually quite indifferent to the fine arts. Rousseau as a man was far from respectable, but who is interested today in Rousseau's personal life? His works alone concern us, and it is not easy to see why the humanists abhor and sweepingly condemn those works. The truth is—and a recent book by a Swedish professor fully recognizes it—that Rousseau was remarkably progressive for his age, and that he did much toward revolutionizing a social system that had outlived its usefulness and had become monstrously unjust. His leading ideas were full of dynamite, and dynamite was needed. He stirred men's souls; he forced them to think and to reëxamine accepted conventions and creeds. He made errors and jumped at conclusions: the canons and methods of modern science were unknown to him. But, considered in proper relation to his time, place, and circumstances, he must be regarded as a great benefactor of humanity.

Consider only two or three of his ideas. He idealized the natural man, the noble savage, and his gospel of returning to nature was largely moonshine. But the court and aristocracy of his day were so grotesquely artificial and preposterously unreal, separated from what one may call nature or life, that Rousseau's slogan represented a wholesome, beneficent reaction. Even the new humanists must admit that it was good for the ladies of the court and high nobility to nurse their own babies—a movement inspired by Rousseau.

Or take the celebrated theory of the social contract. We know now that society is an evolution, not a creation, and that no state, nation, tribe, or community ever came into collective being as the result of a deliberate contract. Government, said Spencer, was conceived in aggression and has been sustained by aggression. Men have never been permitted to secede from the state, or invited and advised to enter into contractual relations with the state. We are born subjects or citizens of states, and must obey the laws enacted by majorities, or organized minorities, or oligarchies, or other forms of government. Yet the conception of the social contract was a magnificent one—inexact, but inspiring. Sir H. Maine, Spencer, and other thinkers tell us that history records a gradual human emancipation from fixed status, or slavery and despotism, and a corresponding growth of free and voluntary coöperation or contract. This, too, may be a hasty and inaccurate generalization. The era

of laissez-faire is passing—has passed perhaps. We hear little of contract and civil or personal liberty these days. Prohibition, trade unions, compulsory insurance systems, state commissions of all types, farm boards, stabilization and valorization agencies, subsidies and bounties, sky-scraper tariffs, constitute severally and collectively flagrant violations and repudiations of individualism and the social-contract principle. Spencer warned us of the coming slavery, and Belloc and Chesterton of the servile state.

But, despite all this, some of us refuse to believe that liberalism is dead or the principle of liberty a lost issue. Our civilization is in the throes of a struggle, but the future does not belong to fascism, or to compulsory communism, or to plutocracy. The individual will not be suppressed. Life without liberty and opportunity for individual development is not worth living. We must and shall regain liberty, and that will mean a society based on free contract. Rousseau was not a good interpreter of the past, but he may prove to have been a prophet. He may some day be to civilization what Marx and Lenin are to soviet Russia today. His picture may look down upon us from every wall and every bill board.

In education, too, Rousseau was, in the main, a forward-looking guide. His ideas were germinal, rich in suggestion and promise.

Prof. Babbitt, to be sure, is not blind to Rousseau's claims and merits. He quotes, without surprise, the remark of that great liberal historian, Lord Acton, that Rousseau has had more influence on the course of human evolution than any other man who ever lived. But he insists that this influence, on the whole, and in every vitally important direction, has been pernicious. Rousseau's dualism, he thinks, is a fatal substitute for the old, the religious dualism. According to Rousseau, the individual is corrupted by society, and our moral progress is hampered by bad and evil institutions. It follows, of course, that it is at once our duty and right to attack and demolish those institutions and to emancipate the individual. On the other hand, the old dualism found the scene of the human drama in the heart of the individual. Passions and appetites have to be subdued and controlled by reason and by the better side of our nature. Institutions are established and maintained by men, and if they are vicious and barbarous, man's lower self was responsible for them. We must reform institutions, therefore, by purifying and ennobling the individuals who support them. The good man will build good institutions.

This view seems not only plausible but sound. But it is too simple, and only cloistered literary men can entertain it. The militant crusaders and soldiers of progress are seldom, if ever, guilty of such superficial reasoning. It is true that when we fight institutions, we fight men—the men who defend and cherish these institutions. To fight capital punishment, for example, is to fight the upholders of that barbarous institution. To fight fascism is to fight the advocates and champions of fascism. To fight graft and corruption is to fight the forces that benefit by graft and corruption. To fight prohibition is to fight the supporters of that dismal farce. And so on.

But Prof. Babbitt and his co-humanists forget the old and important distinction between sin and the sinner. Sincere and fine men may support bad and demoralizing institutions or laws. We may hate prohibition, but we cannot and do not hate all the partisans of prohibition. We may respect and love some of them, while deploring their mistakes of the head, as we call them. And when we assert that prohibition breeds hypocrisy, crime and intemperance, we certainly do not imply that the supporters of prohibition intentionally and perversely breed those evils.

Again, institutions outlive those who establish them. They become obstacles to healthy growth, straitjackets and chains. They survive because of human inertia, habit, misdirected loyalty, as well as acquired and vested interests of a class or group. To fight an obsolete and vicious institution is often to fight our own ignorance, indolence, and rooted habits, and to expose the pernicious effects of the institution. Thus the phrase, fighting institutions, is by no means the equivalent of the phrase fighting men. The psychologists understand that; the literary and ethical humanists evidently do not.

Rousseau, therefore, was perfectly and profoundly right when he formulated his dualism—man vs. institutions and the social environment. His noble savage was a myth, but his emphasis on environment, on conditions and institutions, was philosophically sound.

Finally, let me quote with gratitude and admiration some remarks of George Eliot, a true humanist and humanitarian, on Rousseau and the nature and quality of his remarkable influence. She wrote:

The writers who have most profoundly interested me are not in the least oracles to me. It is just possible that I may not embrace one of their opinions—that I may wish my life to be shaped quite differently from theirs. For instance, it would signify nothing to me if a very wise person were to stun me with proofs that Rousseau's views of life, religion and government are miserably erroneous. . . . I might admit all this, and it would be not the less true that Rousseau's genius has sent that electric thrill through my intellectual and moral frame which has awakened me to new perceptions; and this not by teaching me any new belief. It is simply that the rushing mighty wind of his inspiration has so quickened my faculties that I have been able to shape more definitely for myself ideas which had previously dwelt as dim *Ahnungen* in my soul.

For the naturalists, realists, romanticists and symbolists I hold no brief, and with many of the criticisms passed upon these schools by the new humanists, or others, I find myself in agreement. But it is one thing to criticize tolerantly and sympathetically, and another to heap abuse and scorn upon artists who, with all their limitations, deserve our respect and homage for distinguished and fine work. Zola, for example, certainly did not see life steadily or as a whole, but he was a literary giant in his day. Even Henry James, who called Zola's method "cheap," was constrained to recognize his amazing literary power and his artistic integrity. If the new humanists had the courage of their logic, they would condemn 95 per cent of the novelists, dramatists, and poets of the last century and a half. Even Shakespeare could not escape their condemnation, since admittedly he was ethically and politically neutral and indifferent. He put shocking sentiments in the mouths of his characters—Lear, for example. Of course, Shelley, Dickens, Byron, Tennyson, Hardy, Meredith, Moore, Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy would all severally fail to achieve passing grades under the new-humanist standards. Some of these are too reactionary, and some too radical.

On the continent of Europe, who would escape castigation and the pillory? Not Hugo, Ibsen, not Tolstoy, not Gorky, not Proust, not D'Annunzio, not A. France, not Gide, not—but why continue the enumeration? Pure and perfect classicism is as rare in art as it is in life. And there is much beauty and charm in works of art not strictly classical in spirit or form. Not to see this argues incredible narrowness.

The trouble with the new humanists is that they take no pains to understand humanity. They cultivate a perverse ignorance of life. They often appeal to history, but nine-tenths of it they choose to ignore or distort. In their philosophy there is plainly no room for saints or martyrs, rebels or heretics, for these are never exemplars of measure, proportion, discretion, and poise. Jesus, Paul, Luther, St. Francis, alas, also fall far short of the rigid and precise standards of the new humanists, as do all revolutionary leaders and all stanch champions of the disinherited and down-trodden.

In fine, and in contempt of question, the self-styled new humanism is pedantic, anaemic, sterile, futile, when it is not egregiously reactionary. True, it is possible for any one to call himself a new humanist while rejecting all that is puerile or pernicious in that school and to manufacture a brand new "ism." But that will not get him or us anywhere. Any well-informed person can easily concoct a mixture of individualism, collectivism, romanticism, realism, idealism, classicism, modernism and give it any label he chooses. Your mixture may be harmless and even somewhat helpful. But surely no one who insists upon measure, proportion, decorum and self-control can find this sort of procedure legitimate. There is such a thing as respect for history, for facts, as well as respect for worthy and approved standards, moral and artistic. The new humanism was born dead. Its parents had the best of intentions, but they were unable to give their intellectual offspring the breath of life. They were themselves dwelling in a world fatally unreal. They saw and magnified errors, but they overlooked many vital truths. They mistook the actual and baffling world for a well-ordered library and prescribed little formulae and rules for life that are ludicrously pedantic and inadequate.

BOOK NOTES

The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth. By Max Radin. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1931. Pp viii + 266 (\$3.00)

The author gives us a critical and scholarly investigation of the documents relating to the trial of Jesus, treating the subject as a purely historical problem, uninfluenced by the traditions with which it has been surrounded and which have been accepted without question by most writers on the subject even at the present time.

The chief source is the Gospels, and the point-of-view of each ancient writer is reconstructed, his evidence weighed in the light of his feelings and surroundings. The author does not agree with Smith and Drews, who deny the historicity of Jesus. It must not be inferred, however, that faith or sentiment cloud his outlook, for he gives us a study both fair and scholarly, and not too technical that it cannot be enjoyed by the layman.

Desuggestion. By E. Tietjens, translated from the German by Eden and Cedar Paul. Lincoln MacVeagh, The Dial Press, New York, 1932. Pp. 586. (\$4.00)

Mr. Tietjens is concerned with the philosophy, the psychology, and the conduct of life as they are bound together in their collective effect upon the psyche of every individual. He offers "desuggestion," the correction of misleading suggestions, false ideas and fancies, which so often cause inhibitions and nerve disorders, as an alternative to the methods of psychoanalysis and suggestion. His method does not mean the repetition of formulae, but involves clear and critical thinking. Practical ideas, in themselves as well as in relation to theoretical ideas are of great importance to our mental and bodily condition and changes in ideas bring about changes in behavior and in reaction to circumstances. The book offers a thorough presentation of the subject, written for the general cultured reader who is willing to think.

The Use of the Self, Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning, and the Control of Reaction. By Matthias Alexander. With an introduction by John Dewey. Dutton and Co., New York, 1932. Pp x. 143.

The use of ourselves, our muscles, our organs, and our mental faculties is a vital thing to each one of us; the incorrect use, a calamity. The author tells of his own experience in seeking to overcome a defect in his speech, which he learned was due to incorrect posture and the faulty use of his vocal organs. He evolved a new technique of overcoming bad habits by the conscious use of the self. Chapter three is on the "Golfer who cannot keep his eye on the ball," and chapter four on the "stutterer." There are examples of mental as well as physical habits which are overcome by this method. This is a subject of great interest and importance to the progress of education and pedagogy.

The Drama of Life after Death. A Study of the Spiritualist Religion. By George Lawton. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1932. Pp xxvii 668. (\$3.75)

This book, neither a defense nor an exposé, is a purely descriptive study and analysis of the facts, the beliefs, and the motives of the spiritualist religion. Although a contemporary American religion, its origins go back beyond the beginnings of history. Part I is a complete description of the system of belief, and its practice in daily life; Part II describes the church organization and services; Part III is devoted to analysis, criticism, and discussion of the entire system of belief. Mr. Lawton has added to the literature of contemporary religion, a very able and interesting work.

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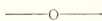
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